

Chapter 119

Replacing Project Managers in Information Technology Projects: Contradictions that Explain the Phenomenon

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ABSTRACT

According to anecdotal evidence, project managers working on information technology (IT) projects are occasionally replaced, although the literature on information systems (IS) and project management (PM) makes little mention of it. With a view to narrowing this knowledge gap the authors examined the reasons behind the practice. The authors took an interpretive approach to the data gathering and analysis, and collected descriptions about replacing project managers (RPM) from interviews and questionnaires (n=43). The concept of contradiction served as a lens through which to identify the underlying reasons. Contradiction refers to statements asserting or expressing the opposite of another statement. The authors identified four contradictions explaining why RPM occurs in IT projects. These contradictions show that RPM appears to be a simplistic solution when there are more fundamental issues to consider. The implications extend to education, practice, and research in the context of IT project management.

INTRODUCTION

Information technology (IT) projects are known for their failure and troubles. Concepts used in the literature carrying the same meaning like IT projects include: software development project (Schwalbe, 2010), software project (Boehm & Ross, 1989; Cotterell & Hughes 1995; Keil, Cule, Lyytinen, & Schmidt,

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1998; Wallace & Keil, 2004), information systems (IS) project (Schmidt, Lyytinen, Keil, & Cule, 2001), and information and communications technology (ICT) project (Dekkers & Forselius, 2007). For the sake of simplicity we use IT project to mean any IS project that the provider implements for the client. The Standish Group Report from 2013 estimated that 43 percent of these projects face challenges, and 18 percent fail by being late, over budget, or producing inadequate results (Standish Group, 2013). The failure rate could be attributable to the fact that IT projects are very diverse. In contrast to projects in many other industries, they are characterized by high complexity, unconformity, changeability, invisibility, and high chances of failure (Jurison, 1999; Schwalbe, 2010). In simple terms, it is relatively easy in a construction project such as building a house to separate building a fence and altering a floor plan, but the elements in information systems (IS) projects affect each other, as well as the existing system (Dekkers & Forselius, 2007). The main characteristics fall into seven categories (Peffer, Gengler & Tuunanen, 2003; Rodriguez-Repiso, Setchi & Salmeron, 2007): abstract constraints, difficulty of visualization, excessive perception of flexibility, hidden complexity, uncertainty, a software-failure tendency, and the goal of changing existing business processes. Therefore, it is not surprising that when Wirth (1996) compared 41 projects in construction, utilities, pharmaceuticals, IS, and manufacturing he found that uncertainty levels (e.g., budget and duration deviation) were highest in the IS projects.

The project manager is perceived as the most important factor in a project's success (Cleland, 1984; Jurison, 1999; Kezsbom, Schilling, & Edward, 1989; Nicholas, 1994). Project management does not exist without the manager, who is the glue holding the project together, the mover and shaker (Nicholas, 1994). There is anecdotal evidence suggesting that managers of IT projects may sometimes be replaced in order to rescue the project, but the literature on IS and project management all but ignores the issue. Our review of the literature on replacing project managers (RPM) revealed only two directly related journal articles (see the search process in Appendix 1). The first one (Abdel-Hamid, 1992) concerned managerial turnover and the data was gathered in the context of a role-playing project simulation. The subjects of the study were graduate students at a US business school studying computer systems management. According to the results, managerial turnover can lead to a considerable shift in costs or schedule trade-off choices, affecting staff allocations and, eventually, project performance in terms of both costs and duration. The context of the second article, written by Parker and Skitmore (2005), was the aerospace industry. The authors collected data from a group of project managers at an international aerospace company, and found that turnover disrupts and negatively affects the project and the performance of the project team, and potentially negates the organization's competitive advantage. These two articles reveal that RPM is a recognized phenomenon, but also that there is a lack of research related to IT projects. Other articles indirectly concern RPM (see Schmidt et al., 2001, on staff volatility, for example).

As a step toward advancing research on RPM in the IT field, we seek to understand why project managers are replaced in IT projects. We use the concept of contradiction in interpreting such incidents. The concept of contradiction has a central role in both dialectical theory (Benson, 1977) and activity theory (Engeström, 1987), for example, and refers to statements asserting or expressing the opposite of another statement, and their struggling relationship. Contradictions are complementary in that both opposites are needed for a joint outcome, mutually implicating as the one implies the other, and polarizing as the differences pull the opposites apart and bring them back together (Carlo et al., 2012). In the area of relational dialectics, for example, inherent in relationships is a contradiction between autonomy and connectedness (Baxter 1988): there is desire to be connected to others and the same time to separate oneself as a unique individual. Other similar concepts include the dilemma and the paradox (Poole & Van, de Ven 1989; see Engeström & Sannino (2011) for definitions of these concepts). Recognition of

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